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ABSTRACT

A survey of attitudes toward extension programs in Carroll, Chariton and Saline counties, Missouri was conducted to serve as a basis for comparison for later study of the effectiveness of these programs. Extension clientele were surveyed concerning the extent to which the present programs were meeting their needs and expectations and their attitudes toward the change to area programming and area agent staff specialization. Usable responses to the six-page questionnaire for clientele totaled 391. A shorter questionnaire was used to determine the feelings of agents on specialization. Findings included: (1) the shift to area agent specialization has created slight problems in contacting agents; (2) 5 percent were dissatisfied with programs, 35 percent were satisfied, and 60 percent were neutral; (3) nearly all were in favor of working with youth groups other than 4-H; (4) 50 percent were in agreement with agent specialization--not considered a mandate in favor of the change; (5) people want a part in deciding program direction; and (6) role ambiguity and value conflict among agents as a result of agent specialization is widespread. (KM)

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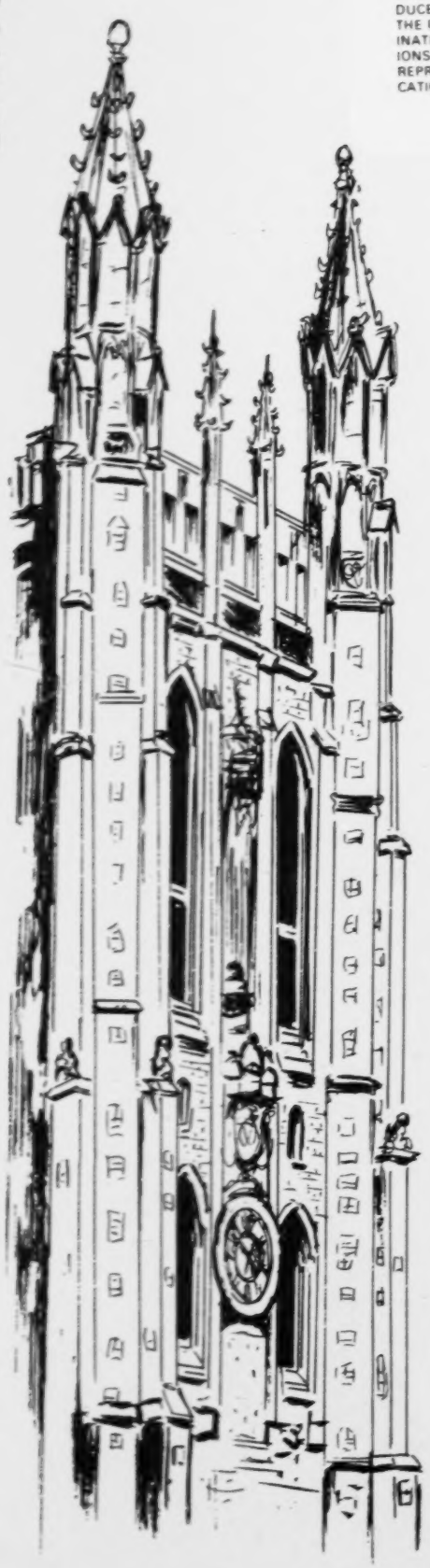

A SURVEY OF ATTITUDES TOWARD EXTENSION PROGRAMS IN CARROLL, CHARITON AND SALINE COUNTIES

Summary of
Special Problem Report
May 1969

Training and Staff Development
Special Report Number 23
Extension Education Department
University of Missouri-Columbia
Edited by John G. Gross

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A SURVEY OF ATTITUDES TOWARD EXTENSION PROGRAMS IN CARROLL, CHARITON AND SALINE COUNTIES

The Extension Division of the University of Missouri, in the counties of Carroll, Chariton and Saline, are implementing the change to area programming and area agent staff specialization.

At the time of implementation, it was the mutual understanding with the Extension Councils in these three counties, that after two years, an evaluation would be made to determine if there should be changes or modifications to this method of programming and staffing.

The official date of the transition was January, 1969. Because of the already established on-going programs, only a few of the area programs were starting to be implemented.

OBJECTIVES

In order to determine, two years from now, if the area programming and staffing has been effective, there needs to be some basis from which comparisons can be made. It was the purpose of this study to serve as such a bench mark study. The survey would also help provide guidelines in developing Extension programs.

The three counties have primarily an agricultural based economy. Approximately 60 - 80 per cent of the income from the area is from agriculture. The predominate enterprises are livestock and corn and soybeans.

The three counties are staffed with a highly capable, experienced and dedicated staff.

Of the many methods of evaluation available, the decision was made to ask the clientele who were using Extension to what degree the present programs were meeting their needs and expectations and to measure how they felt about the area specialization plan.

PROPOSITION

The general proposition is that attitudes and values that people have of Extension can serve as an excellent criterion for the evaluation of Extension program effectiveness. This survey reinforces dramatically that this type of evaluation is meaningful and an important part of Extension.

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

Two questionnaires were used to gather the data. A six page mail questionnaire was used to collect the data from the clientele. This was mailed to a sampling from the mailing lists of the three counties. The questionnaires were not marked for the personal identification of respondents.

There were 727 questionnaires mailed April, 1969 and 391 were received in three weeks which were usable or 54 per cent.

Most of the questions were structured so that a "Likert type scale" could be used for measurement.

A request for comments was asked for on the questionnaire and space provided for them.

A two page questionnaire was used to determine the feelings of the agents on specialization. This was given to 12 of the 13 agents present at a staff conference in early May, 1969.

INTERPRETATION

There are several attitudes one can have as he looks at the results of this study: "It is interesting and it is all we can expect" or "We have tried and the majority like what we are doing" or "After all, you can't please everyone" or "Very interesting, we can show we do have excellent support but there is still a large audience we are not reaching. What can we do that will open us up to this audience?" This latter attitude is this author's impression of the attitude the staff in the "Missouri Valley Area" are taking.

The Extension audience that responded to this mailed questionnaire were primarily farmers by profession, 76 per cent. Almost half,

43 per cent, had either a 4-H member or leader in their home. A majority were between the ages of 36 and 55 years old, and 85 per cent indicated that they had completed at least high school. Most, 54 per cent, perceived themselves as having a medium size business. This way of measuring the size of different kinds of businesses appears quite satisfactory.

Findings

1. The respondents indicated that though there were some problems in contacting the agents, less than 1 per cent indicated that they were having real problems in doing so. There has been, over the years, a satisfactory communication pattern built up so that people know how to get hold of the agent when they really need him. This pattern is being broken, however, as the shift to area agent specialization is being implemented. The communication pattern which existed between staff members also is being changed because of area work. One of the real concerns of the written-in comments was the communication problem.

2. Most of the respondents indicated they were familiar with programs. Only 14 per cent, on the average, indicated they were not familiar with the programs. Active participation, however, only reaches the 24 per cent mark for average of all programs. There might be a problem of the interpretation of active, or there might be a large audience still not participating actively in programs. Either can be implied. This study does not clearly indicate which is the situation.

On the average, only 5 per cent of the respondents indicated dissatisfaction with the programs, while 35 per cent indicated satisfaction and 60 per cent were neutral. A real significant implication of quality of programs is that less than 1 per cent suggested the program be dropped. Two thirds of the respondents felt that Extension does a good job in meeting their educational needs.

3. The implication for working with total youth was clearly presented. When asked, "How do you feel about Extension agents working with youth groups and activities other than 4-H groups and activities?", 77 per cent were in favor, 63 per cent strongly in favor, and only 5 per cent were not in favor.

4. This Extension audience, in general, are saying that, from their perception of agent specialization, 50 per cent were in agreement

with it; 28 per cent were neutral or undecided; and 22 per cent said they were against the approach. From the respondents' answers, it would be hard to find a mandate or concensus in favor of staff specialization. They are going along with it on the basis of their faith in the present staff. It must be remembered that this population was not the total audience reached by Extension, and therefore some caution should be used in making broad generalizations.

5. The implication is clear that people are concerned about their community. There was almost unanimous agreement on the statement that people should understand what happens in their community because local issues and problems affect their lives.

6. People want more than to be "educated." They want to have a part in deciding program direction. Almost two thirds, 60 per cent, agreed that they would like an opportunity to be involved in helping to decide Extension program direction. The implication is clear. Maybe the learning experience in helping to decide programs would be as meaningful for many as being on the receiving end.

7. There is support for the Extension programs. It appears that over 50 per cent of the respondents have at least one program they would 'climb the ladder' to prevent its loss. The median indicated that at that particular point in time they would climb to the sixth rung to do so.

8. Role ambiguity and value conflict could erode the advantage of specialization. The agents have endorsed the concept of area agent specialization from the standpoint of being better informed, more competent in subject matter, and more efficient in developing programs. Seventy-five per cent (75) of the responses indicated specialization would reduce conflict in the subject matter area. When the responses on agent values were placed on the conflict scale, 43 per cent indicated an increase in conflict and interestingly 27 per cent were undecided, which could be easily interpreted (with this specialized audience) as also having increased conflict.

When the responses on roles were placed on the conflict scale, 50 per cent indicated increased personal conflict, 25 per cent indicated this directly, and 25 per cent were undecided, which also would increase conflict.

When all the responses were summarized together, they were

about equally divided; 50 percent indicated an increase in conflict and 50 per cent a decrease in conflict. This is an important finding of this summary.

The agent cannot leave his values behind when he goes to work. They are a part of his identity.

Training should be implemented to reconcile this role ambiguity and value conflict with the staff.

SUMMARY AND SIGNIFICANCE

To the question, "Is the audience Extension is now reaching satisfied with present programs?", the answer is "yes." There are some problems which are significant, some of which the agent staff has started to solve.

The respondents are concerned in what they perceive as serious problems of increased travel; the increased difficulty in contacting agents and of "spreading them too thin." The communication problem could be an important factor in the success of this approach.

There needs to be much thought and involvement of people and how to involve people in program planning. This will be especially important as they are involved in identifying new audiences. Clearly defined objectives, audiences, methods, and philosophy will need to be developed, especially in the transition period.

This study provides an excellent opportunity to truly involve people in the program planning process. It does, however, strongly suggest that the total audience has not given Extension a mandate to go specialization and as Wilson et al, (1) pointed out in regard to area agents:

> There is sufficient opposition to certain roles for area agents in some counties to warrant careful selection. It would appear that area agents may find it conducive to their work if they play certain roles in some counties and other roles in other counties.

(1) Wilson, Newell and Ramsey. Attitudes of County Leaders Toward Expanding Adult Programs in Extension. Agricultural Extension Service: University of Minnesota, 1969.

This statement is especially pertinent to this situation at this point in time.

OBSERVATIONS

People are concerned about Extension and are willing to provide suggestions to improve its programs. This clearly indicates the value in this type of study and Extension can conduct them with confidence that it will strengthen their programs, morale and organization. As one comment stated, "Your interest in conducting this survey is to be commendable."

One of the objectives of this study was to allow this writer to "look at" the operations in the field. The staff is competent and is working hard to make specialization work. Another respondent commented, "If agent specialization can work, this staff will make it work."

Serious consideration should be given to adopt an up-to-date personnel appraisal system which takes into account the professionization of the staff. High priority on this item would help the continued development and morale of the staff. Special attention should be given to an updated system for handling their mailing lists.

While specialization means many things to many people over some continuum, further studies of the meaning of the words "generalist" and "specialist" need to be made before definite conclusions can be drawn.

While administration needs to make decisions and policies in this regard, it is also apparent the University must have some responsibility to offer alternative methods or approaches. It could easily be argued that the majority of the staff is more than competent to deal with the majority of questions in technology it meets in its usual day to day operation. One wonders if the same could be said about its understanding of itself and of its group and interpersonal competence.

The indications are that the staff would respond to a learning situation to help them clarify their roles and to study ways of reducing conflicts which this change brings about.

The cooperative and interested attitude of the respondents should be noted and thanked. While some negative comments were

received, there were many more which were positive, and still others which offered constructive suggestions. Of special importance was the complete absence of derogatory remarks.

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Source: Unpublished Special Problem Report, Department of Extension Education, University of Missouri-Columbia, May 1969, by William H. Brown.